

## **Testimony to the Education Committee of the CT Legislature**

March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2019

### **Testimony in Support of: H.B. 7082 (RAISED) AN ACT CONCERNING THE INCLUSION OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDIES IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOL CURRICULUM**

Dear Members of the Education Committee of the Connecticut General Assembly:

My name is Stefan Keller and I am a resident of Hartford Connecticut. I am writing in support of H.B. 7082 AN ACT CONCERNING THE INCLUSION OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDIES IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOL CURRICULUM with the amendments put forward by SEJ (Students for Educational Justice). This bill is important to me because I believe that talking about the history of race, racism, anti-blackness in all schools is an essential first step towards breaking down the racial injustice that still exists in our country today.

I work for CT Students for a Dream, an undocumented, youth of color led organization and worked at a high school in Bridgeport for 2 years. I could talk about all of my experiences there and the importance for youth of color to learn about their own history in a real, authentic, and non white-washed way. However, you will likely hear today from many of those youth today who have the power to share about their own stories and personal experiences. Instead, I will talk about why I feel this is essential for students growing up where I did, in white, suburban Connecticut.

I am white and grew up in Bethany, Connecticut, a town that is still, to this day, 91.6% white and less than 2% black according to 2010 census data, which is likely very similar to when I went to school there over a decade ago. My first memory of having a student of color in one my classes was in middle school and I do not remember having any real authentic relationships with any students of color until well into high school. Based on many conversations I have had with white folks growing up in suburban Connecticut, this is more of the norm than the exception. This means that for many of us, our early understandings about race, racism and people of color come from social media, television, music, and the education system.

In terms of my learning about race and racism in school, I remember learning about black leaders during Black History Month. I remember about the civil war and slavery. I remember learning about Jim Crow Laws and the Civil Rights movement. From these teachings I remember the messaging as being there were bad, evil white people that hated black people, especially in the South, good white people and black people fought to change unfair laws, and after the civil rights movement the problem of racism was basically solved.

That was it. We did not have in depth discussions about how racial classifications came to be and how racism developed in this country. We had no discussions about how racism is structural and what that meant for our history and our society today. In an almost all white school with an almost all white staff, we got to walk away from those discussions never having to feel the impact of what racism has meant for people of color, the damage and destruction it causes to people of color and especially black communities, and how it still is alive and well in all of the systems we have today. And on top of that, there were no black folks there to challenge this perspective and share experiences that would show how wrong and incomplete this view was.

As white people in Connecticut it is essential that we grapple with the history of race and racism in our own state, understand how whiteness and blackness were created, and be able to have discussions about what this means for creating a more just world moving forwards. The amendments that SEJ are critical to making these conversations happen. It is not enough to just learn about African American history but it is critical to view it through the frameworks of systemic racism and the impact that has had on our country.

Racial bias and anti-racist training is also extremely important to include for staff and administrators. This should go without saying in schools that serve predominantly students of color but is important in schools with mostly white students as well. Students are going to have questions and deep discussions, some of which may reveal the ignorance and lack of understanding that our deeply segregated society produces, and teachers will need the tools and resources to navigate these conversations, serve as models for their students in talking about and understanding race and racism, and also to scaffold learning to deepen students' understanding of these topics.

For all the reasons above, I strongly stand in support of H.B. 7082 and urge the Committee to consider amending the bill as proposed by Students for Education Justice and to ultimately vote favorably and ensure that this legislation becomes reality.

Thank you for your time and for the opportunity to submit testimony.

In community,

Stefan Keller